

Grace Alone

Ephesians 2:1-10

Prayer...*Holy God, You are gracious and compassionate; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We come to reflect on Your Word this morning and we pray that by Your Holy Spirit we would not only hear Your Word but allow it to transform us from the inside out. Help us deepen our understanding of Your grace and what it means to live by grace alone. Amen.*

Jesus tells a parable

of a man who had two sons.

The youngest of the sons becomes bored of life as it is

and asks for his share of the family inheritance,

then he heads off to a distant country

to have some fun.

If you've grown up in the church

you likely have heard the story of the Prodigal Son.

If you didn't grow up knowing this story

the son blows all his money, realizes his mistake,

comes crawling back to his father

only to be fully accepted back into the family

and thrown a massive party.¹

A lot of Christians hear that story

and find meaning and focus on the youngest son.

But the Father had two sons.

The eldest son stayed home

(while the younger one squandered his inheritance).

The eldest son stayed and continued to work for the Father;

he cared for the Father, the property,

and the livestock of the family.

While the eldest son was in the field

(doing all the family chores)

the youngest son returns, and the party is set in motion.

By the time the eldest son comes home

the party is in full swing!

Jesus shares,

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So the father went out and pleaded with him.” Luke 15:28

What we’ll notice about the whole parable

¹ There are many cultural layers that add to the depth of the story, but you can find it in Luke 15:11-32. I suggest reading Timothy Keller’s *Prodigal God* book as a guide for that parable.

is we see the Father *going out to meet both of His sons*.

When he sees his youngest son from a long way off,
the Father *runs out* to meet him.

When the older son is too upset to go into the party
the Father *goes out* to meet him.

What I love about the Prodigal parable

is that it's not about the youngest son
nor is it about the eldest son.

It's all about the love of the Father;

His compassion, His mercy, His **grace**.

This morning we explore the theme of **GRACE ALONE**.

One of the most well-known themes of the Reformation
comes from our passage:

that salvation is by ***grace through faith***.

Indeed this is the Truth of the Church.

But what does declaring **GRACE ALONE** mean for us today?

I believe the answer to that question
is found in the Prodigal story.

As we move forward

we'll take a look at what Paul writes about grace

to the congregation in Ephesus

and we'll see how that lines up with Jesus' Prodigal story.

Then we'll finish off with the implications

for us today, declaring **GRACE ALONE**.

PAUL TO EPHESIANS

Chapter two of Ephesians

has Paul outlining what life was like for the Ephesians

before they had faith in Jesus.

He says,

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Eph 2:1-3

Paul refers to the **prince of the power of the air**

which “In the cosmology of the Hellenistic age

the interstellar space, especially between

the moon and the earth,
was believed to be the place of
constant demonic activity, with baneful
effects on all earth dwellers.”²

Paul speaks into the context of his time

to identify various cultural influences

that were distorting the message of the gospel,

or the very teachings that the Ephesians

had once followed before hearing

the good news of Jesus.

So Paul puts things into perspective

He puts it rather bluntly

by saying,

we were by nature deserving of wrath.³

Again we have the idea we explored last week,

that God’s infinite holiness cannot tolerate sin.

But as we explored last Sunday

God has an issue with sin,

² Martin, Ralph P. *Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 26.

³ Ephesians 2:3b (NIV)

so God initiates a solution: Jesus.

Paul continues,

BUT GOD, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — Eph 2:4-5

Anytime you see in Scripture: **BUT GOD,**

it's time to listen up because here's the twist.

The situation was going downhill...BUT GOD...

We were deserving of wrath...BUT GOD...

We were dead in our sins...BUT GOD...

The twist we hear

is that this Holy God who is wrathful toward sin,

is also a Holy God who is **rich in mercy,**

whose **love** toward us is so **great**

that even though **we were dead in our sins**

God ***made us alive together with Christ.***

Just sit with that for a moment.

We were ***dead***...in our sins.

Some people say death is the only certainty in this lifetime.

BUT GOD...defies such certainty.

God made us alive together with Christ.

Now let's pay close attention to tense of that sentence.

God **MADE** us alive (past tense).

We were made alive at the same time

when Christ was made alive.

We are made alive through Jesus' resurrection life.

So the life we now have by God's grace through faith

is not our own life, but the life of Christ in us.

Paul continues:

“BUT GOD...raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Eph 2:6-7

God raised Jesus to life

and seated Him on the throne in heaven.

If by faith, in Jesus, we receive Christ's resurrection life in us,

then we too are **raised with him**

and **seated with him.**

Because Christ was resurrected so are we.

Everything He gained, we gain in faith.

Christ gained it first and we benefit from His victory.

Now let's be honest with ourselves.

Is this not a hard message for us to wrap our minds around?

We live in an age that glorifies and values self-made people.

- *Walt Disney*, grew up in poverty, in an abusive home with an abusive father...yet created the “happiest place on earth.”
- *Oprah Winfrey* was raised by a teen mom and lived in a rural Mississippi home without indoor plumbing, yet is one of the most famous women in our time.
- *Thomas Edison* was kicked out of school for being too easily distracted, yet he changed human history
- *JK Rowling*, a single mom from Edinburgh, not only had more money than the Queen of England, but is known as the woman who keeps dropping off of Forbes's list of wealthiest women because she keeps giving her money away.

But God's Story

shares that ***there's nothing we've done or could do***

to deserve, earn or obtain salvation for ourselves.

PRODIGALSTORYOFGRACE

It's at this point we see

how the Prodigal story overlaps with what Paul is saying.

The life before faith in Jesus (that Paul outlines in vv. 1-3)

is the way of the younger son.

It's the life unburdened by responsibility.

Whatever craving you have,

whatever desire is within you,

you chase it until you're filled.

Guaranteed you'll come up empty later

but you don't care...you'll just fill the craving

whenever it comes up.

The older son is harder to see in Ephesians

but we see it in the struggle to understand **GRACE**.

Paul writes it is **by grace you have been saved**.

This means that we've done *nothing*.

Our behaviour, our dedication, our devotion...

none of it contributes to salvation.

The older son, though staying with the Father,

misses what it actually means to be with the Father.

Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! Luke 15:29-30

The older son, though staying with the Father,

doesn't resemble the Father at all!

The older son is motivated by fairness.

He believes that: because he stuck around,

because he did everything the Father asked him to,

because he obeyed the Father,

he should be held in higher esteem

than his younger brother.

But the older son fails to recognize

that His Father is not fair...He's gracious.

The beauty of grace is that it makes life not fair.

There's nothing fair about grace.

One commentator says,

“Grace is not God’s way of helping us to become obedient children; it is rather God adopting us, unworthy though we are.”⁴

Grace is not fair.

Paul emphasizes a second time:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Eph 2:8-9

Grace is not fair.

Grace is not earned.

Grace is a gift.

Grace is a Holy God recognizing

His own wrath toward sin is only appeased by a sacrifice from God.

Grace is God becoming that sacrifice and appeasing Himself,
so that His love and compassion might fall

⁴ Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Authority After Babel* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 39.

on His broken, chosen people.

That He might be in relationship with that chosen people

and raise them up to new life and seat them

alongside Christ as the royalty

He designed them to be.

It is not by their own merit.

It is all **GRACE ALONE**.

It's God's actions, God's plan, God's victory, God's gift to us.

What's interesting though,

is verse 10 speaks of **good works**.

But it is not the same good works

that are mentioned in verse 9.

These works,

*"...are the necessary consequence and outcome of the readers'
new life in Christ."*⁵

This is the fine line,

where our motivation is either FAIRNESS or RESPONSE.

We can have good works for the wrong reasons.

These are the moments we need God's grace

⁵ (Martin, 29).

to heal our hearts and stir right motivations in us.

The right motivation for good works

is always a joyful response to the grace we've received in God.

GRACEALONETODAY

So what does it mean

to declare **GRACE ALONE** today?

To declare **GRACE ALONE** is to live counter culturally.

It's to live life, wrestling between

two very human responses to God.

One response to God's gift of grace,

is to assume it's greatness

and so how I live my life day to day doesn't matter,

because I'm covered by grace.

(This is the Younger Son response).

It chooses to wade in the shallows of God's grace;

never fully understanding it,

nor recognizing its deep impact on life.

Paul has stern words to those who think this way:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Rom 6:1-2

To declare **GRACE ALONE** is to take serious
the reality of sin in our lives
and to allow God's extravagant gift of grace
to heal and transform us —
turning us away from that sin, so that
we might resemble the Gracious Father.

The other response to God's gift of grace
is to blur the line between response and merit.

(This is the Older Son response).

It studies the Bible, learns the rules,
and lives according to them.

But somewhere along the way,

it focuses so much on living well and being good
that the whole purpose of living with the Father is lost.

No longer are we *responding to the grace received*,

instead, we're proving to ourselves we're worthy of that gift;

somehow we've earned that gift.

And we deserve that gift *more* than another person
who hasn't lived the obedience I've lived.

This response to God's gift
is motivated by fairness.

But God is not fair. He's just...but not fair.

God is **GRACIOUS**.

And grace outweighs fair any day of the week.

For us to declare **GRACE ALONE**

is to find ourselves half way between the two sons,
where we find the Gracious Father
(ready to run out and meet either one of them).

To finish, I'll just say

If you're reading the book for our monthly book club,
you'll recall John Ortberg saying,

"The most frequent promise in the Bible is 'I will be *with*
you'."⁶

⁶ Ortberg, John. *God is Closer than You Think*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 15.

That is the promise of a **Gracious God**.

No matter what you've done...

no matter what you haven't done...

I will be *with* you.

That promise is GRACE ALONE.

Thanks be to God!

And we are His portion and He is our prize,
Drawn to redemption by the grace in His eyes.
If His grace is an ocean, we're all sinking.
And Heaven meets earth like an unforeseen kiss,
And my heart turns violently inside of my chest.
I don't have time to maintain these regrets
When I think about the way...

That He loves us,
Oh, how He loves us,